

reviews

The Political Economy of Hydropower Dependent Nations: a case study of Zambia, by Imaduddin Ahmed

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This book lacks an attention-grabbing title, but its author reminds us that until recently the World Bank funded many projects in the developing world which are designed to benefit the West. The study also makes grim reading for proponents of hydropower as a sustainable energy source because, among other things, climate change is causing drought and emptying reservoirs. Drought is therefore causing power supply disruption, making it hard for nations wishing to diversify into manufacturing and away from relying on mining or subsistence agriculture.

Dr Imaduddin Ahmed was motivated to investigate Zambia's hydropower provider, ZESCO, after repeated power outages in 2015-16. For decades the World Bank applied a template for development based on the Tennessee Valley Authority, an FDR-era project that revolutionized the lives of millions of poor Americans. Put simply, the TVA stimulated a consumer boom for US-made products and created employment. The World Bank then imposed the TVA model on countries with no domestic manufacturing base, meaning that America had new export markets for its goods.

The WB began funding hydro power plants on the Zambezi in 1956, giving the copper mines (run by foreign companies paying tax elsewhere) the energy they needed. Few local jobs were created. The eventual economic uptick was then wiped out in the 1990s when international financial institutions imposed structural adjustment, forcing governments to sell off their assets and drop import tariffs. All these years later, only 33% of Zambians have access to the grid: it remains geared to the benefit of the mining companies who consumer 70-80% of power and pay subsidised prices. Now that climate change is causing drought, there are frequent outages, forcing manufacturers and others to use highly polluting diesel generators. (Anyone spending time in Africa will be familiar to the rattling drone and greasy smell of generators that supply as much as a fifth of the continent's energy).

Dr Ahmed runs through the alternatives to hydro, suggesting a mix of sources, and regional integrated power grids. But where the WB left off, Chinese state companies now secure construction contracts and mining concessions through corruption (according to a former director of the Central Bank of Zambia). We are reminded that the world needs an efficient means of storing sustainable produced energy. Despite its rather heavy-going appearance, this book is a fascinating read for anyone interested in the developing world and/or the environment.

This review ends on a hopeful note: in August, Zambia had its third peaceful transfer of power, what Human Rights Watch calls "an uncommon occurrence across Africa." Hakainde Hichilema of the United Party for National Development won a landslide victory against the incumbent, Edgar Lungu of the Patriotic Front. Hichilema had support from young people seeking a brighter future and voters fed up with corruption, environmental disasters, human rights abuses and the decline of democratic norms. He will have his work cut out.

Rebecca Tinsley

Dr Hakima el Haité, President of Liberal International, has written to Hakainde Hichilema congratulating him & his party for their resounding victory on 12th August. She wrote 'Your inauguration as the 7th President of the Republic of Zambia lights a beacon of hope on the continent, demonstrating that Africans can and will use their vote to hold leaders accountable.' The UPND is a member of the Africa Liberal Network.